

# Telling the Strategy Story: CFAR's Approach to Strategic Planning

## Telling the Strategy Story

How did Groupon become the fastest growing company in web history? How has Trader Joe's captured more market share than Whole Foods, while holding on to its down-home image?

**Why is it that some strategies work, while other plans wind up on the shelf?** The answer lies in how an organization tells its story—how top teams come to discern the thread of their distinctive strategy, where past, present, and future options make new or renewed sense. While many consulting firms offer strategy support, clients have chosen CFAR for more than three decades because we help clients craft a strategic narrative that motivates action and creates sustainable change.

## The CFAR Difference

CFAR applies both quantitative and qualitative methods to deepen leaders' understanding of the current state of their organization, by analyzing the business from the inside and reviewing relevant external trend data from the outside. We help organizations take a fresh look at what makes them distinctive in the market, what aspects of the business are profitable and why, what their customers want, and what key competitive threats they face. Both individually and collectively, leaders gain a new perspective on their business, assess strategic choice points, locate a compelling rationale for agreement, and build an authentic story about why *these* choices at *this* time will produce the desired results. In this way, we help close the gap

between the business vision and the work the enterprise actually needs to do to collectively move toward it.

Now more than ever, executives can find themselves feeling stuck about how to accomplish a new approach to their business while sustaining values towards customers and employees. In these situations, CFAR is the firm of choice, offering strategy methods and tools that match a client's desire for directional clarity with an approach that deeply connects to the people and culture of the business. Our work results in a strategy story that builds excitement across the enterprise and guides a top team in undertaking critical, forward looking work that strengthens their leadership in ways that are both challenging and enabling. The outcome is effective, sustainable performance improvement that recognizes important organizational values.

## CFAR's Approach

We start with a **"Discovery Phase"** that makes beliefs or assumptions about the business context explicit, comparing performance data with the ways people talk about the business. We listen to the top team describe the focus of the business, the customer base, and the organization's values and aspirations.

We study the company's financials and other performance metrics and surface the story in the data. We use survey and other data collection tools to surface assumptions about strategy,

test options against external trends, and identify choices. Using data and discussion, our approach brings diverse perspectives into a fresh light, whether in carefully designed small or large groups. We are able to help leaders develop a new conversation that allows for the "riskiness" raised by strategy choices, while also supporting candor among the team. The result is a new, shared understanding of the current state of the business that helps leaders see choices about the future that are both realistic and culturally attuned. We conclude this phase with the outline of potential, viable, alternative futures as well as the implementation activities they suggest.

The second **"Creating the Strategy Phase"** develops the strategic plot line. In this phase, using the highlights or important features from phase one, together we scan the range of possibility, evaluate alternatives, and clarify the business and cultural implications of different strategic choices. An important feature of CFAR's method in this phase is the thoughtful engagement of select staff and line leaders in the exploration of alternatives. This approach allows those most influential and knowledgeable about the organization to anticipate points where the strategic "plot" is unrealistic. They can then find connections between the emerging strategy and different parts of the business. The result is strategy that reflects both aspiration and reality, and

a view of leadership that is integrated and aligned.

We know that strategy is what you do, not just what you say you do, so we help clients prepare for implementation with an essential third

“**Implementation Phase,**” in which the broader organization is recruited into the strategic story and readied for the changes necessary to enact any change. This phase identifies specific operational activities and potentially new metrics for tracking against goals, including resources required. This phase also includes mechanisms for keeping strategy fresh as the business landscape changes.

## Case Studies

### Integrating System Strategy

CFAR worked with a multi-billion dollar, multi-state health system to develop their first system-wide strategic plan. Partnering with the client’s leadership team, CFAR advanced a strategic planning effort that culminated in a strategy summit in which over 100 system leaders discussed their current performance, the future of health care delivery, and the possibility of the system’s role in it. Participants created a shared vision of the system’s future and a detailed tactical plan to ensure that the local systems and central office were clear on their individual and collective contributions to the organization’s long-term success. Leaders across this large, complex system were able to agree on its strategic direction and determine concrete actions to advance a shared set of strategic goals.

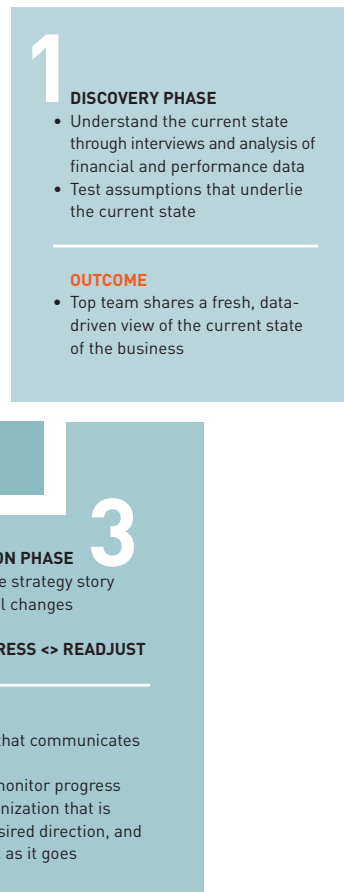
### Strategy for Succession

The founder of a multi-million dollar real estate and construction business had passed away, leaving no succession plan. CFAR helped the

new leader form a senior team and develop a strategy and story about their future that allowed the company to grow from \$30 million to \$200 million in just five years while maintaining the founder’s original vision and high standards for quality. In support of the strategic plan, CFAR helped the company establish growth and profit goals for each business unit, design an accountability system to track strategic initiatives, and expand the company’s board of directors with high-level, influential leaders who could challenge the CEO.

### Strategy engagement brings Strategy Commitment

The new president of a competitive liberal arts college wanted to launch his presidency by engaging the entire community in a strategic planning process, to create a shared vision about technology, pedagogy, study



abroad, diversity, sustainability and globalization. CFAR gathered and analyzed financial and qualitative data to craft an understanding of the current state of the college, and identify assumptions about how external forces could influence future decisions. Using our Strategic Options tool, we engaged more than 150 faculty, trustees, staff, students and alumni and reached out to more than 7,000 others in the college’s extended community. Using the survey results and our earlier analysis, we created two alternative scenarios of the future, which were used to invite a diverse set of stakeholders to understand and appreciate the difficult choices and tradeoffs. The process helped the president and his leadership team make difficult decisions and has deepened his relationships with faculty, trustees and other key constituents early in his tenure.